

Interviewee: Judge Julio Manuel Fuentes

Place of Interview: Judge's Chambers
Municiple Court, Newark, NJ

Date of Interview: October 13, 1987

Interviewer: Valerie Bianco

Interviewee: Judge Julio Manuel Fuentes
Place of Interview: Judge's Chambers
Municiple Court, Newark, NJ
Date of Interview: October 13, 1987
Interviewer: Valerie Bianco

- V.B. When did you decide to leave Puerto Rico? What motivated you to leave your homeland?
- J.F. I didn't decide, my mother did. Economic reasons were the key factor. My mother wanted to get a higher-paying job as a practical nurse in N.Y.
- V.B. When did you leave (year). Where did you go? With whom did you leave Puerto Rico?
- J.F. 1950. We went to N.Y.C. I left with my mother and brother
- V.B. How did your family react when they learned of your decision to leave?
- J.F. Most of our extended family were already in the U.S.
- V.B. When did you come to N.J. Why did you chose N.J. instead of another place in the U.S.?
- J.F. 1952. My mother chose to live in N.J. because her English was very limited at that time and she couldn't get a license in N.Y.C. to be a practical nurse so she worked in various factories in Newark while waiting for a job opening in the nursing field. We also settled in N.J. because we had many relatives to stay with while we were looking for an apartment.
- V.B. Where in N.J. did you first settle? Why did you choose that location? Did you know anyone in N.J. when you first arrived? Was anyone awaiting you?
- J.F. Newark. Mother worked in factories in Newark. Cousins and aunts and uncles were waiting in N.J. for our arrival. They extended their homes to us while we searched for our own apartment.
- V.B. How did you travel from Puerto Rico? How did you finance your trip?

J.F. By plane. I don't remember, I can't recall because I was so young and my mother didn't discuss this with me.

V.B. What do you remember about that trip? How did you feel? Had you traveled before?

J.F. Memory is very vague. I was excited though. I hadn't traveled before.

V.B. What personal effects did you bring on that trip? Did you bring enough money to last you until you found a job?

J.F. We lived with my maternal grandmother in Puerto Rico so we didn't own property or furniture to sell. We brought our clothing. I don't recall if my mother had enough money or not. I imagine she did.

V.B. Did you have plans of returning to Puerto Rico? Why did you want to return?

J.F. My mother had no plans of returning to Puerto Rico. She wanted to make a new life for us here.

V.B. Did you know anyone who had migrated to N.J. and returned to Puerto Rico?

J.F. I didn't, but I imagine my mother did.

V.B. What was your initial reaction when you arrived in N.J.? What impressed you the most? Was it like your imagined?

J.F. After staying in N.Y.C. and bouncing around from apartment to apartment in Newark, I was impressed the most with the community we lived in, Lakehurst, Ocean County, N.J. I liked the openness of the Jersey Shore. It was much prettier than all the concrete in N.Y. and Newark. It was not at all like I imagined it. I was only in the 6th grade.

V.B. Where did you move to when you first arrived in N.J. In a house? Apartment? Rooming House? How were your living quarters? Was it expensive?

J.F. My mother, brother and I lived with my cousins. These relatives, along with many other Puerto Ricans, lived in this particular community because they were working as chicken farmers. They rented their house from the chicken company like most of the workers. They opened their home to us because my mother got her first practical nurse job in Lakewood, at Paul Kimball Hospital, which is near Lakehurst. We liked our new living quarters with our cousins. It was an improvement from our apartments in N.Y.C. and Newark.. The house was pleasant. At my young age I don't recall how much money it cost to live with our cousins.

V.B. How was the neighborhood? Was it a residential or commercial area? What other groups lived in the neighborhood?

J.F. Once you got used to the smell of the chicken coups, the neighborhood was nice. It was a farm area including the residents. It was an Hispanic community made up mostly of Puerto Ricans and other peoples of Spanish descent.

V.B. Were any of these Puerto Ricans from your same town in Puerto Rico?

J.F. The only ones were my cousins.

V.B. Why did you move to that specific neighborhood? How were you received by the neighbors?

J.F. We moved there to be close to my mother's job at the hospital. I was received well by my Hispanic neighbors and non-Hispanic schoolmates. There were no adverse reactions.

V.B. What was your furniture like? How did it compare with what you had in Puerto Rico?

J.F. It was sparse but comfortable. It was good enough for my needs at the time (me being a child). I don't remember what my furniture was like in Puerto Rico. I don't recall ever missing anything.

V.B. How long did it take to get used to your new life in N.J. What did you miss most about Puerto Rico? What did you like/dislike most about your new life in N.J.

J.F. I adapted quickly and very well. I only missed the tropical climate and living right on the beach. I missed the quick access to swimming. I don't remember my first winter here, so it must not have been that bad. There was nothing that I disliked about N.J.

V.B. Name?

J.F. Julio Manuel Fuentes

V.B. Age?

J.F. 41

V.B. Where were you born?

J.F. La Playa de Humacao. It's on the southeastern part of the island of Puerto Rico, on the Atlantic Ocean.

V.B. Occupation?

J.F. Municipal Court Judge, Municipal Court of Newark, N.J.

V.B. How many years of school did you complete?

J.F. 21 years (including grammar and high school).

V.B. Have you ever been married? Where? Name of spouse?

J.F. Yes. I got married in Panama. My wife's name is Olma.

V.B. How did you meet your wife? How long did you know each other before you were married?

J.F. I was in the army stationed in Panama at the Panama Canal. I knew my wife for 1½ years before we were married.

V.B. What kind of work did your wife do when you were married?

J.F. She was an office manager.

V.B. What kind of work did you do at the time of your marriage?

J.F. I was a first lieutenant in the army.

V.B. Have you any children? What are their names? Where were they born?

J.F. I have three girls; Lilly, Karina and Olma. They were all born in the U.S.

V.B. Father's name? Place of birth?

J.F. Julio Manuel Fuentes is my fathers name. He was born in La Playa de Humacao, Puerto Rico.

V.B. Mother's maiden name and place of birth?

J.F. Trinidad Mercado, and her place of birth was La Playa de Humacao.

V.B. Names of brothers and sisters? Place of birth of each?

J.F. I have one brother. Here is older than I, and his name is Jose Mercado. He was born on April 6, 1941.

V.B. Father's occupation?

J.F. I don't know. I never met my father.

V.B. Mother's occupation?

J.F. As of now she is a retired practical nurse.

V.B. What was your life like when you lived in Puerto Rico? What do you remember? What was your childhood like?

J.F. I remember it as being happy. I don't have bad memories of my childhood. It was playful outside, lots of open space area. We were by the ocean, so it was a happy childhood generally.

V.B. What memories do you have of your parents? Your grandparents? Do you have a favorite relative? How were children treated in your time?

J.F. I have no memory of my father or his parents. I have fond memories of my mother and her parents growing up in Puerto Rico. My favorite relative at that time was my grandmother. My mother was always working. She was the supporter (the bread winner) and I lived with a very large family in Puerto Rico; lots of aunts, uncles and cousins and a lot of happy memories. There were lots of kids running in and out of the house, and because we were neither rich nor poor, we all had our responsibilities around the house.

V.B. How were you as a child? Shy? Outgoing? Happy? Sad?

J.F. I was happy and outgoing; although I had my shy and unhappy moments like any other normal child.

V.B. What did you want to be when you grew up? What goals did you set for yourself when you were a child?

J.F. I wanted to be an airplane pilot or policeman.

V.B. Did you like school? Did you like your teachers? What subjects did they teach?

J.F. I did not attend school in Puerto Rico.

V.B. How did you find your first job in N.J.? Did anyone help you obtain it? What type or job was it?

J.F. My first job of any consequence in N.J. was that of a lawyer. Before that I was an officer in the army. My very first job was in a supermarket as a bagger/stock boy. I got the job in the Lakehurst community for extra spending money while I was in high school.

V.B. How were the working conditions? Salary? Benefits? How did your superiors treat you? Did you get along with other employees? Was there a union?

J.F. The working conditions, salary and benefits were all good. They suited my needs as a 17-year-old person. I was well

- treated by my superiors and the other employees. In order to get the job, I had to join a union and my dues were deducted from my salary. Before the supermarket job I have vague memories of having a paper route.
- V.B. What other ethnic and racial groups worked with you? How did they treat you? Other Puerto Ricans?
- J.F. I worked at the Shoprite Supermarket in Toms River. The minority rate at work was very low. There were very few black people, and I was the only Puerto Rican on the job. We all got along very well.
- V.B. How would you compare your first job in N.J. with the job you had in Puerto Rico?
- J.F. I had no job in Puerto Rico, being only four years old when I lived there.
- V.B. What training or skills did your job in N.J. require? Did you feel qualified for the new job? Did you join the union at your place of work?
- J.F. No training or skills were required of me at Shoprite. I felt confident when I went to work there. As a matter of fact, I felt confident with all my jobs thereafter. I didn't feel that I was better than anyone else. I felt that I could do what was required as an officer, and I gained leadership experience in the army which helped me when I became an attorney. I'd like to add that I was a lifeguard in the summer of my high school years.
- V.B. Have you every been unemployed since you came to N.J.? How did you support yourself during that time. Did you get any help from any person/agency?
- J.F. The one time that I was ever unemployed that had the greatest effect on me, that I was conscious of being unemployed, is when I got out of law school. I took the bar exam and I had to wait a number of months to get my results. So, for six months I was out of work. That was one of the rare times that I was out of work that had any impact on me at all. I was not married at the time. I went to law school in Buffalo, N.Y. and when I graduated, I chose to return to Toms River to get a job as an attorney, but I could not get a job because the market in Toms River was closed to law school graduates that did not have any connections in Toms River. It helps to know the people that you are going to work for. It's a lot more difficult than getting a job in an urban area. I had certain marketability in urban areas because I could speak Spanish and am Puerto Rican. Even though I couldn't get a job in Ocean County, I was interviewing for jobs. I was interviewed by a fellow in Brick Township and he said "a

person like you shouldn't be applying down here. You'd probably do much better up in the city." And that was the only reason he wanted to interview me, just to tell me that. Well, I appreciated it and as a result I made a number of applications in Jersey City. I also interviewed with the Bronx District Attorney's Office, but nobody would hire me until suddenly I passed both the N.Y. and N.J. bar exams. And suddenly I had two jobs. The point is, I became a lot more employable after passing the bar exams. And that's pretty much why I didn't work during that time period. I didn't want to work as a law clerk during that time because I needed all my free time just to find the right law firm that would hire me and suit my needs as well. I lived with my mother during that time period, so I didn't have to worry about living expenses.

V.B. How did you obtain the job you have now? What do you do in your new job? Are you happy with your job? With the salary/wages and conditions at work?

J.F. The job I have now is an appointed position and to have it you have to be a lawyer of good standing and a resident of N.J. I had been practicing law for about three years in Jersey City, and I was offered a position of what used to be called a part-time judge in Newark. So, I accepted the position and practiced law at the same time. That was in 1978. In 1981 the position of judge was converted to full-time. Originally the position was an appointed position. I was appointed then by Mayor Gibson. It's really not that simple or easy. You don't get the position just because you practice law. Actually, it involves quite a large support from the Hispanic, primarily Puerto Rican, community in Newark which advocated for a Puerto Rican to sit in this particular position. It started out with my two predecessors: John Dios and R. Martin Oliveras. John Dios was the first Puerto Rican appointed as a result of civil strife and disturbances in Newark. The 1974 race riots involved a segment of the Hispanic community and a result of that was a concession made to appoint a Hispanic to the Municipal Court -- resulting in Judge Dios being promoted to Superior Court. R. Martin Oliveras was appointed to Municipal Court and when he resigned, I followed in his place. In my position I address the less serious criminal offenses. Those for which the maximum sentence is six months in jail or a \$1,000 fine. That's the maximum jurisdiction for this court. We try traffic violations such as D.W.I., moving violations and parking violations. The bulk of our work does involve the "disorderly persons offenses" which are again the less criminal charges. We address them from the very beginning [from] the first appearance right through trial. We also perform marriage ceremonies. I'm very happy with my job. I'm also happy with my wages. I'm paid by the city of Newark. You might do better at private practice, but this

job has its own rewards. The salary is adequate. There is some amount of stress with my working conditions, but it goes with the "turf." You take it and you manage. You work your way through it. In some cases there is stress in the decision that is made because you want to be careful and do what you believe is right. Sometimes you make decisions regarding people's liberties which means putting them in jail. So you want to be careful about those kinds of decisions, but I view myself as a decisive person. I don't mind making important decisions when they have to be made, and I don't dwell on them because the next day I have an additional number of important decisions to make as well. So I've come to make my decisions and move on. You have to be sensitive and compassionate but also decisive.

V.B. What obstacles have you found in your line of work? Has your ethnic origin as a Puerto Rican helped/hindered you in N.J.? Has your knowledge of Spanish helped/hindered you in job advancement?

J.F. As far as a judge is concerned, it was an absolute help because the position of Municipal Court judge called for an Hispanic to fill it. At that time I was appointed because of my qualifications and the fact that there was a call for someone of my ethnic background. There might have been other Hispanics or Puerto Ricans applying for the position, but I was not informed. The key was that I was working as a Judge part-time so that helped in my candidacy along with being Puerto Rican. In a way, I was in the right place at the right time. I moved to Newark from Hudson County one year after being appointed to full-time judge. As a lawyer and judge, my knowledge of Spanish helped me in my job advancement. Sometimes I can speak Spanish to a person appearing before me as long as it does not go on the court records. In this way I can aid a person in their orientation of the court proceedings of their case. It has to be minor matters but when you get to the "heart" of the case, it has to be in English. We have interpreters on hand for people who don't know English too well.

V.B. Did you know any English when you arrived in N.J.? Do you speak English now? How did you learn it?

J.F. When I arrived in New York. I would say no. But after starting kindergarten in N.Y. I learned it very quickly.

V.B. How would you compare your life in N.J. with the life of your relatives in Puerto Rico? Are you better off? Are they better off? How would you explain the differences between the two?

- J.F. I feel that we are better off in N.J. than in Puerto Rico. We came here for a better life and we stayed. I believe the employment possibilities were much greater for my mother and she's always worked. She's never been of any public assistance and she's never been without a job. I feel very lucky that we had a good life here. My mother came here with no education and worked to get her high school equivalency diploma. All of my other relatives have come here to settle over the years. The only family of mine in Puerto Rico at this time consists of an uncle and another distant relative that I have never had a close relationship and we do not keep in contact.
- V.B. Describe a day in your life in N.J. from the time you rise to the time you go to sleep.
- J.F. On Saturdays until 12:00 p.m. I take my daughter to dance class. From 12:00 p.m. it's free time. Two Saturdays a month I have some activity to attend. For example, this past Saturday I went to an Hispanic Law Association dinner. Sunday is of course a day of rest. I may run a little bit and I may study and prepare cases or do office work at home. Out of five week days, I attend one meeting, sometimes as many as three meetings per week in the evenings. I also take a graduate course on Monday evenings that's not related to my judicial practice. The other four evenings I'm studying at home or reading. I also practice playing the piano. My hobbies are reading, tinkering with my piano, and spending time with my family.
- V.B. How does your family celebrate the holidays? Christmas? Holy Week? Birthdays? Days off?
- J.F. Very traditional, like anyone else. My mother comes to my house for Christmas, but my brother and his family do not because he has children. And they like to spend the day at their own home. Sometimes, for Thanksgiving, or Easter, my brother and his family have dinner at our house. My mother spends all the holidays with us.
- V.B. Do you belong to any religious organization? How do you feel in that organization? How does it celebrate the religious days? Do you go to church often?
- J.F. I belong to Our Lady of Good Council Parish in Newark. I go to church. I would not say often; about a couple of times a month. My church celebrates the religious days in the traditional Roman Catholic manner.
- V.B. How does your family celebrate such occasions as births, baptisms, weddings? Are they similar or different from the way they were celebrated in Puerto Rico?

- J.F. We carry on traditions from the Puerto Rican culture, but it has to be a hybrid because you know there are certain approachments from a dominant culture that creep into your own personal beliefs. You still have some of the old ways where family becomes important and so it's important to be home with your family and children and to do things together on such events as bithdays. But birthdays are done with a great deal of flair and balloons and something that has a theme. You may even have a party at a restaurant and invite a bunch of kids. I'm not sure that in Puerto Rico you might have a birthday party at McDonalds. I don't know, but that's certainly more common here and you do that because that's the way the children are growing up. The children are growing up with the same attitudes and needs of the dominant culture and that's what they want and you give in to them because it's their birthday. We may not do that in Puerto Rico. I don't know how weddings differ. The problem is if you don't grow up with the traditions yourself, you don't impress them on your family.
- V.B. How do you relate to other members of the Puerto Rican community? Hispanic community? With members of other ethnic racial groups?
- J.F. I relate to them very well. You have to, when you're in a position of high visibility. It's also one that the Hispanic community has a great deal of interest. It's important to relate well in a professional sense. Not just because you're a judge you're going to be friendly with certain groups. I do associate with a group of Hispanic professional men and we feel a common bond in that we speak Spanish and come from the same culture. It helps to break the ice in social occasions when meeting new people of the same heritage. I speak Spanish with my wife and on occasion with my children.
- V.B. Do you belong to any social organization? How did you decide to join it? What activities does your organization sponsor? What is your rule in that organization?
- J.F. I belong to the Borinquen Lions Club. It's made up of Hispanics, primarily Puerto Ricans, and it's a social service organization. It's organized for public service as well as social activities. I also belong to the Hispanic Bar Association. I don't belong to La Casa Don Pedro, although I know many of the people that work there. I'm one of the Board of Directors for the Hispanic Leadership Organization which is affiliated with La Casa. I decided to join the Hispanic Bar Association because of common interests with other Hispanic lawyers. My decision to join the Lions Club was because it is a community service organization based in Newark and that's the opportunity one has with meeting other professionals as well

- as performing a public service. The public library was painted as a result of the efforts of the Lions Club. The Lions Club donates money to charities such as the Association of the Blind and they put on Christmas parties for certain childrens' groups. They also give out a perfect attendance award to one Hispanic student a year.
- V.B. Can you tell me about the task force you're associated with?
- J.F. A couple of years ago, I was one of a number of people, I think the total was 48 people, appointed to a state-wide task force by the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. It's called the Task Force on Minority Concerns and the purpose of it is to study the question of the relationship with minorities and the courts in N.J. at all levels, civil & criminal, and the treatment of minorities; the whole range of issues and problems concerning minorities and the judiciary in the state of N.J. It's a very broad mandate. I've been working at it for some time, but I haven't issued any reports or claims. There are committees of the Task Force. My role is in the Juvenile Justice Committee and what we are specifically considering is the issue of the minority juvenile and the criminal justice system. I don't have a particular role in the Lions Club; I'm just a member. I'm a member of the scholarship committee at the Hispanic Bar Association.
- V.B. Do you know if there are any Puerto Rican/Hispanic organizations in your neighborhood? What do you know about them? Have you visited any of them?
- J.F. I've visited La Casa and "Focus" many times. These are service organizations for the Hispanic community. For example, senior citizens and their needs. La Casa is a multi-service organization. It's a very large organization ranging from day-care, all the way through to leadership programs. This is primarily geared to the Hispanic community. They help migrants with jobs (placement) and housing.
- V.B. Have you any knowledge about the municipal and state agencies that can help you in case of need? Have you ever visited any of them?
- J.F. Those were the agencies we were talking about. I certainly don't have a need for them, but I can refer people to them that have particular needs. These are not government agencies. They are charitable organizations. As far as municipal and state agencies are concerned, I refer people to the Housing Assistance Authority and numerous agencies that assist with the homeless, heating problems in apartments, day care for children and other various public assistance agencies.

- V.B. To whom do you turn in case of need? Relatives? Friends? A Spanish/Puerto Rican agency? Government agency?
- J.F. I don't have any of those particular needs because of my position. Basically, people turn to me. That's not my opinion of myself, but there are others that may think so. I have to limit my friendships because I occupy a sensitive position. Sometimes I have to limit my contacts quite severely. There are ethical things that you have always got to consider. I socialize more with my peers and colleagues than I do with other folks. For example, I associate mostly with judges and some lawyers also some professionals. I try to avoid contacts with folks who in the future may have matters that may be presented to me in a court of law.
- V.B. When visiting a government agency, do you go alone? With one of your children? With a friend/relative? Social worker?
- J.F. This doesn't apply to me
- V.B. Are you registered to vote in N.J. Have you voted? What do you think of N.J. politics?
- J.F. I've voted many times. I can't comment on N.J. politics because of my judicial position and I don't get involved in it.
- V.B. Have you ever voted for a Puerto Rican/Hispanic candidate in N.J.?
- J.F. I voted for a member of the Board of Education. His name is Hector Ortiz and he did not win that particular election. My vote was the only physical support I gave him.
- V.B. How have you fared in N.J. If you could begin anew, would you migrate to N.J.? Would you go elsewhere? Would you stay in Puerto Rico?
- J.F. I have fared very well. I can't say. You end up being so satisfied with your own professional position. I would say yes, but I was not the person who decided to come here in the first place. Maybe if I stayed in Puerto Rico I would have done better, but I haven't the foggiest notion. But I certainly wouldn't want it to be anything other than what it is. I might have if I were in a different economic situation.
- V.B. Are you planning to stay in N.J. permanently? Will you return to Puerto Rico? Will you go somewhere else?

J.F. Yes, I will stay here permanently. I plan to return to Puerto Rico for a visit. The last time I was there was in 1968.

V.B. In general, how has life treated you? Have you reached the goals you set for yourself as a child?

J.F. Not as a child but certainly as a young adult, yes I have. Life has been good to me.

V.B. How do you see your future? Your children's futures? Will they remain in the U.S.? Will they move to Puerto Rico?

J.F. I doubt that they will go to Puerto Rico since this is where they have been brought up, but what's important is that they are aware of their heritage as Hispanics. Although they are staying here they should not lose their Hispanic heritage. They should always be aware of it. My older daughter is in high school and she is more aware of her Hispanic heritage than her younger sisters. She socializes with other Hispanic teenagers. My oldest daughter is at Science High School and my two youngest are in Catholic schools.